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### CHAIBASA CHURCH: TRADITIONAL ROLE OR CREDIBLE SIGN OF SALVATION-LIBERATION?

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**Introduction :-** Current trends in theology (especially ecclesiology) and sociology have challenged all of us to reflect critically upon and analyse, according to sound theological and sociological methodology, the work we are engaged in, insofar as it is a microcosm of the Church's role in Indian society today. The following essay is a limited attempt to respond to this challenge. Part I will seek to analyse socio-politically a students' movement for justice in Chaibasa (Singhbhum, Bihar). Part II will analyse the Church's response to the movement. In the hope of continuing a dialogue initiated by Fr. C. Godwin in his thought-provoking article, 'The Role and Function of Christian Religion in Indian Society' (Clergy Monthly, May-June, 1974). The analysis of Part II will be attempted according to the various 'functions' of the Church.

*Part 1 :- The Chaibasa movement : an attempt at a socio-political analysis*

**Background :-** Chaibasa is the administrative centre of Singhbhum District, southernmost district in Chotanagpur. It is strategically situated between the mines of Gua, Noamundi, and Kiriburu, and the steel centre of Jamshedpur. The population in the town is approximately 31,000, whereas the surrounding 200 adibasi (Ho tribe) villages have a population exceeding one lakh. The economic situation of the non-professional, non-officer popu-

lation in the town is serious (five starvation deaths were reported during the month of May this year); the situation of surrounding Ho villagers is similarly serious, although the Hos retain the security — won by force of arms — of owning their own lands. The economic problem in the Chaibasa area is not one of scarcity; there are plenty of food supplies and plenty of money in the area. But these food supplies and this money are in the hands of a small but powerful Merchant community. Over the years this community has gained control of the government and police officials in the town, whose function has become to protect the interests of the Merchant community; in return, these officials are guaranteed economic (and other) rewards.

**Beginnings of the movement:-** On 25th May, 1972, a group of local high school and college students accompanied a group of villagers on a seven-mile walk to the Chaibasa Block Development Office. Thus began a movement that in two short years was to spread through-out Singhbhum District. On that day students and villagers confronted both the Block and District Development Officers concerning the non-payment of public funds for the construction of an irrigation well that the villagers had been working on 24 hours a day in order to complete it before the coming of the monsoon. The B.D.O.'s representative had previously demanded a 10% bribe for payment of the money. As a result of this confrontation with the two officers on 25th May, and a follow-up confrontation with the same officers the next day in the village itself, funds were provided on 29th May for the completion of the well.

Moving on from the issue of Block corruption, Chaibasa students organized the public and other students around a series of issues: unjust admissions policy in the local government college, merchants' stealing from village women in the local bazaar, a mines owner trying to drive villagers from their homes, police and hospital negligence resulting in the death of a young man, corruption in a local high school, bribery in a municipality office, withholding of stipend from high school and college adibasi students, harassment of villagers in the district education office, government and police inaction in the case of a rape of an adibasi girl, payment of less than minimum wages to village men and women doing contract labour in Chaibasa, hoarding and consequent rising prices of



essential commodities. The issues of minimum wages and hoarding are presently the focus of the students' organizing activities. In all the issues mentioned, and others, the students together with the people of the area were victorious in their confrontations with the respective authorities.

The students' efforts, together with the people of the area, over a period of two years resulted in the following:

1. a unique student movement in which the focus of the students' attention was not students' needs, but the needs of the people.
2. student confidence in the effectiveness of well-organized, non-violent action with the people for justice.
3. a realization among more and more young men and women of the need to identify with and take **risks with the people** in order to achieve **justice with the people**.
4. a rapidly increasing awareness among town-dwellers (especially) and villagers of the oppressive situation in which they are forced to live.
5. a growing respect among the people for the students, whom they had first feared (and whom some villagers still fear), but now see as their main hope for justice in the present situation.

The students deliberately avoided identification with any political party. CPI, SSP, and Yuwa Congress had unsuccessfully courted the students on a number of occasions; the leader of the local adibasi Jharkhand Party had previously lost the support of the students of the area by his blatant corruption and alliance with the wealthy of the town.

Since most of the students' efforts with the people had been aimed at the corruption and injustice of government, police, and educational authorities, the Merchant community had remained silent

Such was the situation in Chaibasa up to 20th March 1974.

**Radicalization of the Movement:-** On the morning of 20th March, 1974, a procession of college students wound its way through the streets of Chaibasa, reaching the Deputy Commission-

er's office at approximately 11.30 a.m. The students requested the D.C. to accompany them, and help them inspect thirty godowns in Chaibasa in order to discover how much wheat, rice, sugar, salt and other essential commodities were being illegally hoarded. The D.C. refused the students' request. The students thereupon, together with a magistrate, opened and sealed one godown; as they were on their way to another godown a small group on the edge of the crowd opened an adjoining godown and began to empty its hoarded contents on to the road. At this point the police lathi-charged and tear-gassed the students. (Actually, eye-witness observers report that the D.C., who had arrived on the scene, originally ordered BSF troops to fire on the students; when the BSF Captain refused to do so on grounds that the local police had not yet acted, the order was given for police to attack the students with lathis and tear gas )

20th March, 1974, was a turning point in the Chaibasa movement. From this date on :

1. Students and public saw clearly for the first time in Chaibasa the role of the government, police, and military in protecting the economic interests of the Merchant community against the people. All future actions would take this into account. (In the days and weeks ahead, the students would catalogue and publish a detailed list of concrete instances of this government-police-military-Merchant alliance.)
2. Political parties, sensing an explosive situation, would try to exploit/manipulate/suppress the movement according to their respective party aims.
3. The Merchant community, openly attacked by the people for the first time in Chaibasa, could no longer afford to remain silent in the face of the movement.

The first of these three new developments — the awareness of and decision to act against the alliance between government, police, military, and Merchants — radicalized the movement, to the extent that now the focus of its attention was the very basis of all the corruption and oppression in the Chaibasa area. The second and third new developments brought divisions in the up-to-now unified student movement.



**Students Surrounded :-** The Communist Party of India was commissioned by the Ruling Congress to divert and/or suppress the students' movement in Chaibasa (and throughout Bihar) in order to preserve Congress political hegemony – the political status quo – at all costs. The means chosen by the CPI to carry out this task in Chaibasa was continuous personal attacks, through a paid cadre of students and non-students, on the leaders of the student movement. The focus of the CPI attacks fell on the main student leader, a 4th Year science student of Tata College (the local government college). On four occasions (20th March, 10th April, 23rd April, 7th May) they engineered police traps against this student; twice they succeeded (20th March and 23rd April), and the student leader was arrested. They once unsuccessfully tried to ambush and beat the student leader (8th May); they ran him down with a scooter on 10th May, inflicting injuries that required hospital treatment. In their efforts to divert/suppress the student movement, the CPI received full cooperation from the local police and from the numerous CID agents in Chaibasa at the time. All of these attacks, personal and physical, upon the movement's leaders, solidified the unity of the core group within the movement and increased public sympathy and support for the movement. Much time, however, was diverted from the central issue of government corruption and Merchant monopoly.

The Yuwa Congress, while less visible than the CPI, was more directly political in their attacks on the student movement. Their platform was simple: reform through the present Congress government—in other words, political status quo. Both the Yuwa Congress and the CPI were operating on free-flowing budgets. The Yuwa Congress spent Rs. 20-25,000/- on a single and singularly unsuccessful—demonstration in Chaibasa. (In contrast to both the CPI and Yuwa Congress, the students of Chaibasa relied on contributions from local town and village dwellers. While this caused economic problems, it increased the rapport between the students and the public.)

The Merchant community, seeing themselves now as targets of student/popular action, sought to buy off a faction of the student community, encouraging them to focus their attention solely on 'government corruption.' It is a mark of the power of



the Merchant community in Chaibasa that, in spite of this strategy, it was still able to rely on constant protection from these same government officers. (On two successive nights, while curfew was imposed on students and public, merchants—with government and public protection—were enabled to clear out their godowns and transport their goods outside of Chaibasa; another night, police removed a student checkpoint on the main road leading out of Chaibasa and arrested the students manning the checkpoint; within an hour four trucks filled with rice left Chaibasa on that road.) Politics was of interest to the Merchant community only to the extent that their economic interests would be protected. As long as the present officials remained, the Merchant community knew it could buy protection from them; if, in order to distract the students and public from attacking them, it was necessary to point accusing fingers at these same officials, this mattered little. If these officials were transferred or dismissed, it would just be a matter of buying economic protection from a new set of officials. In short, whereas the CPI and Yuwa Congress, both commissioned by the ruling Congress, sought **political** status quo, the overriding goal of the Merchant community was **economic** status quo.

After 30th March, the attitude of both government and police official—influenced by state-and nation-wide policy—hardened towards the movement. Negotiations were replaced by lathis, tear gas, rifles; false warrants, arrests without warrants, Sec. 144, curfew. Democratic measures gave way to those of a police state. All the time, prices continued to rise (increasing Merchant profits) and wages remained the same (increasing public hardship). The original demands of the agitation that began on 20th March were fixed prices for essential commodities, and legal wages for workers. (Eventually, the wages of municipality workers were raised, but other wages remained the same.) The attitude of the government and police toward the Chaibasa movement was best symbolized by the attitude of the Deputy Commissioner—in front of whose office the students conducted a hunger strike for two consecutive months—towards the Tata College student who fasted for twenty-three consecutive days. Whereas the D.C., through his subordinates, frequently tried to break the strike - including ordering the arrest of two other students on indefinite strike - he never once came to meet, let alone speak with, this student.



Whereas an increasing number of lawyers came out in support of the students—perhaps influenced by the fact that a lawyer was one of those arrested in the first flurry of at-random arrests on 20th March—educational authorities, professors, and teachers remained silent, mainly for fear of losing their jobs.

The students, therefore, found themselves surrounded on all sides—actually, all sides but one—by forces of the status quo, armed with weapons and unlimited funds. The only side open to the students was the public: town-dwellers and villagers with whom the students had worked during the previous two years. The people—though by no means having yet shed all their fears—responded: in the beginning, mainly the town-dwellers; by mid-May, town-dwellers and villagers alike. The more the students were attacked by government and police authorities on the one hand, and Merchants and politically-motivated-and-financed factions on the other, the more the people came to the support and protection of the students. On 24th April, when seventeen students were arrested for no reason in the middle of Chaibasa (the previous night BSF troops had also been ordered to lathi-charge the site of the hunger strike), 200-300 people followed the students to the jail and demanded to be arrested with the students; they were driven back from the gates of the jail by the police. When the student leadership was challenged by the CPI-financed faction at a public meeting on 5th May, it was the people who rejected the challenge and re-confirmed the student leadership. This public support and protection, plus the students' proven ability and experience in non-violent organisation were pitted against the money and weapons of the status quo forces.

**Focal Point : Hunger Strike :-** The focal point of the student movement was a hunger strike instituted in the beginning of April, following a mile-long silent procession of village women, lawyers, students, and general public in pursuit of the movement's demands for fixed prices for essential commodities and legal wages for workers.

All sections of the population saw in this hunger strike a symbol of student/public resistance to the status quo in Chaibasa, and reacted accordingly. As mentioned above, on orders from the Deputy Commissioner, officers frequently came to the site of the



strike to dissuade the students from continuing the fast ; finally, the S.D.O. and D.S.P. arrived with a detachment of armed BSF troops and arrested two of the students who were into their seventh day of indefinite fast. The strike nevertheless went on. The principal of Tata College with two professors, at the behest of the D.C., attempted to persuade the students to break the strike ; the students ignored them. The Chairman of the Municipality, the most formidable representative of the Merchant community in Chaibasa, also tried to break the strike ; the students continued the strike. The CPI-financed faction spread rumours concerning relations between the boys and girls taking part in the hunger strike ; the students, with public support, ignored the rumours, and continued the strike. The Yuwa Congress tried to provoke a violent confrontation at the site of the hunger strike in order to provide the police and BSF with a further opportunity to attack the students ; the fasting students remained silent in the face of the provocation, and the strike continued.

The site of the hunger strike—where one group of young men fasted in shifts of 36 hours, another group indefinitely, and a group of young women fasted in shifts of 12 hours—served many purposes. Besides being a focus of attack by opponents, it was a rallying point for students and public ; it served as an office for the movement, where students and public of Chaibasa and other movement centres in Singhbhum district could meet and discuss strategy ; for those who did not feel capable of joining the movement in any other way, it provided a means by which they could show their support by a temporary fast ; the students on indefinite fast provided the necessary sign of stability and commitment to the movement.

**The Movement Spreads:-** The Chaibasa movement spread throughout Singhbhum District : to Jhinkpani, Jagannathpur, Noamundi, Gua ; Seraikela, Chakradharpur, Sonua ; Kharsawan, Hata, Haldipokar. Political pressures cut the movement short in Sonua and Chakradharpur, but long-standing contacts between Chaibasa students and the students and public in the other centres, particularly in Jhinkpani, Jagannathpur and the Mines Area, kept the movement going in these centres despite Merchant attacks on students, police arrests, and, in the Mines Area, threats of company



retaliation. Ironically, each time official and merchant pressure would increase on the Chaibasa students, the movement would spread to a new centre. The pattern of action in all these centres followed the Chaibasa pattern : mass meetings and processions, hunger strike, representation of the people's grievances to those in authority. Following the Chaibasa example, all Singhbhum centres pressed for the **demands of the respective locality**. It was only in the latter part of May that the Singhbhum movement joined the state-wide movement for the resignation of Assembly members and the dissolution of the Assembly.

**To the Village :-** In late April the students decided to place even greater emphasis on work in the villages. This decision was based on the following :

- a. The heart of Singhbhum is its villagers
- b. Official violence against the students was intensifying in the town (lathi-charges, widespread preventive arrests without warrants, arrest with false warrants, roaming bands of merchant-paid gondahs searching for students).
- c. The C P I-financed faction was also intensifying its personal attacks on the student leaders.
- d. Because of (b) and (c), an excessive amount of time was being wasted in the court and in countering personal and physical attacks—time that should have been spent in organising the people to confront official corruption and the Merchant monopoly.

The decision to emphasize even more work in the villages was made following an unprecedented (for Chaibasa) student-organized mass march and rally of over 3,000 people. The decision was bolstered a few days later by the visit to Chaibasa of two Ranchi student leaders who advised a similar village strategy for all of Chotanagpur. At the same time a large villagers' meeting in Chaibasa voiced strong support for the movement.

Work in the villages spread rapidly, in spite of government warnings to all village Mukhiyas against students' activity in the villages. Nightly meetings were held, organized by students and

villagers together. The students' decision to move more decisively to the villages, and the rapid spread of the village work caught the CPI faction by surprise. The faction also suffered setbacks on two other fronts: a CPI Yuwa Morcha rally failed; the faction's attempts to prevent Sarvodaya leaders from Gujarat and Patna from meeting the Chaibasa movement's leaders failed. Perhaps it was partly from a sense of frustration in the face of these developments that the CPI faction turned from personal to physical attacks on the movement's principal leader at this time, attempting to ambush and beat him on one occasion, as previously mentioned, and knocking him down with a scooter on another occasion.

As a result of the month-long program of nightly village meetings, and in spite of a last-minute attempt by the CPI faction to further disrupt the movement by spreading rumours and fears among the villagers, hundreds of village men and women armed with bows, arrows, and hatchets, came to march in Chaibasa on 27th May.

Four days later amidst a mass public gathering, the students ended their hunger strike, and prepared for the 5th June procession and rally in Patna led by Jayaprakash Narayan. The ending of the hunger strike also coincided with the publication of the first issue of **Kranti Doot**, a newspaper prepared by Singhbhum students and dealing with the present social and political situation in the district. It is indicative of the present situation in Chaibasa that the students could find no press in Chaibasa willing to print **Kranti Doot**: it had to be printed outside of Chaibasa.

**Summary:-** How to make some sense of this plethora of meetings, marches, representations, personal and physical attacks, arrests, threats, beatings, etc., etc.? In other words, as a result of the two-year old Chaibasa movement—of which the events since March 20th, 1974, were merely an advanced state – what is the present situation in Chaibasa?

1. The source of the basic conflict/contradiction in the Chaibasa situation has surfaced in full view of the public: The economic interests of a small merchant community, protected by the government and police (and recently, the military), against the mass of villagers—the majority of whom are still fearful of political participation—and lower and lower-middle class town



dwellers. Symbolically, on the same night (8th May) as students and people together, in the middle of a Chaibasa maidan, were deciding on the future direction of the movement, just  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile away in one of Chaibasa's luxury homes, the Deputy Commissioner and other government and police officers were sharing a feast together with the merchant community, to celebrate a wedding in the family of a leading merchant.

2. The active student community, which, by its work with the people during the past two years, has successfully surfaced this conflict/contradiction, is seen by the public as the main catalyst in any effort to overcome this contradiction.
3. The people, especially but by no means solely, town-dwellers, are more aware than ever before of the political situation in Chaibasa. Nevertheless, while they fear the students less and trust them more, the people on the whole are as yet fearful incapable of acting on their own.
4. The CPI has lost credibility with both students and people; the Yuwa Congress is viewed by the Chaibasa public as a crowd of gondahs, as a result of its looting of numerous small shops on its way out of Chaibasa following its unsuccessful rally on 7th May (as a result of public pressure, a reluctant local administration arrested two Yuwa Congress leaders, and issued a warrant in the name of a third); the local Jharkhand Party, while retaining its perennial emotional hold on many adibasi villagers, showed itself incapable of effectively acting against the oppression suffered by Singhbhum adibasis—this because of ties between the local Jharkhand leader and the local merchant community.
5. Educational authorities, teachers, and professors, by their silence during, and in some case opposition to, the movement, lost further influence on the student community.

Student non-violence in the face of official violence in Chaibasa during the past two years has been unique, given the amount of violence in recent years throughout the state and nation. A major question, therefore, remains: Given the overwhelming—and increasing—power of wealth and weapons in the hands of the combined forces of merchants, government, police

and military in Chaibasa, can the people and students achieve justice by continuing along the path of non-violent action? This is the question being asked most often these days among the people and students of Chaibasa; it is a question that says much about the oppressive effect of the presently ruling economic and political forces on the people.

But what about the role of the Catholic Church in wards this movement?

## *Part II :- The Chaibasa Movement :- The Role And Function Of The Catholic Church*

**Background:-** The Catholic Church of Chotanagpur was born between the years 1868 and 1873 in Chaibasa and its surrounding villages. Most of its members, however, soon moved north towards Ranchi, and it was there that the Church grew. It has only been within the past 25 to 30 years that the Church has become a recognized community in the Chaibasa area. The number of Catholics in Chaibasa parish is only 4,000, or less than 3% of the previously mentioned population of the area, 1,31,000. The Church's numerical presence is heavily outweighed by its institutional presence in the area: parish house and large, modern church; parish dispensary; lower primary school; boys' 'middle school and hostel; boys' high school and hostel; girls' middle and high school with a joint hostel; grihini school; night school; college hostel.

The following analysis will suggest that the experience of being a minority and the consequent desire to protect and propagate itself through its institutions, are important factors that have hindered the Church in Chaibasa—both authorities and individual members—from publicly supporting the Chaibasa movement. The analysis also suggests that the prevailing vertical relationship between religious and Church authorities and the people—a relationship in which initiative and direction is always expected from the top—has similarly hindered the Church from public involvement in the movement. The situation is further complicated by the presence of foreigners in the local Church; authorities—both foreign and Indian—have sought to protect the presence of these foreigners



by avoiding controversial statements and actions in public— statements and actions that might endanger the continued presence of these foreigners. Such avoidance of controversy on the part of authorities, together with the above-mentioned relationship between authorities and people—which has often resulted in the people imbibing uncritically the attitudes of those in authority—has influenced the Chaibasa Catholic community's indifference/opposition to the student movement. An example of this uncritical adoption of the attitudes/opinions of those in authority is the opinion voiced by one local Indian priest: 'If this work continues, they (the government) are going to throw us out!'

The analysis will also suggest that the prevailing catechesis has served to privatize the message of Christ—a privatization that makes it difficult for the people of Chaibasa to respond to the social dimensions of the Christian call, particularly in regard to justice.

It hardly needs to be said that the following analysis by no means intends to question the generosity, good will, and at times heroism of the men and women who have laboured over the years—with little recognition or thanks, except the gratitude of the people—to serve Christ and his people in Chaibasa. Rather, the analysis is a very limited attempt to initiate, carry on a dialogue so that together we might 'ensure that she (the Church) does not continue, unconsciously and unintentionally, to give scandal, becoming a sign which contradicts Christ, even as she is acting with the best of intentions, convinced that what she is doing is in accord with the will of Christ' (Fr. C. Godwin, 'The Role and Function of the Christian Religion in Indian Society,' **Clergy Monthly**, May-June, 1974).

**Centre of the Student Movement:-** The centre of the student movement in Chaibasa is St. Xaxier's College Hostel, whose students provide the leadership and organizational experience to the movement. Thirteen (or 20%) of the 65 students in the hostel are Catholic; of these thirteen, only two take an active role in the students' movement. Fifty per cent of the students, however, have attended the Catholic middle school and/or high school in the area, and therefore are well acquainted with the local Catholic community, and the teachers, priests, sisters, and

brothers who have taught them. In spite of this relationship between the Catholic community at large and the students of St. Xavier's College Hostel—the site of which used to be the parish house and middle school—there has been minimal participation in—and at times active opposition to—the movement, on the part of the local Catholic community. As in all controversial issues, this indifference/opposition is influenced to some extent by the personalities involved in the work: During the last 2½ years, one religious priest has been living with the students in the college hostel; he has been accompanied at various times by a diocesan seminarian and/or a religious brother. The attitudes of the Chaibasa Catholic community, however, seem to transcend personalities; they reflect in many ways the attitudes described by Fr. Godwin in his above-mentioned article—attitudes based on a particular conception of the Church, and on the **functions** the Church performs in the life of the individual and community.

**Functions of Belonging and Security :-** In his analysis of the Church's function of 'belonging', Fr. Godwin points out how minority groups—like the Church in India—seek protection in its 'own' institutions—schools, dispensaries, properties. The Chaibasa Catholic community finds great security in the local presence of the Catholic schools, hostels, dispensary, church—and clergy and religious whom the community considers responsible for the running and maintenance of these institutions. The community's dependence on the Catholic institutions—a dependence nurtured by the institutions themselves through generous educational and medical 'concessions' to Catholics in the past—has served to shield Catholics, to some extent, from the corruption and injustices prevalent in other institutions and society at large. One result of being shielded in this way from the corruption and injustices in society at large is an indifference on the part of the Catholics in these institutions, and a fear of involvement in efforts to remove the injustices suffered by their non-Catholic brothers and sisters. It is feared that such involvement may threaten the continued existence of the institutions on which they depend so much. Time and again Chaibasa student leaders have been told by teachers and authorities in the local Catholic schools: 'If we get involved in the work, the school/institution will get a bad name.'



In expressing their dependence upon and fear for the continued existence of these institutions, the school authorities and the Catholic community at large are reflecting the opinions of the local Church and religious authorities. The local bishop and religious superior were both provided with a daily account of the growing police and official oppression of the students and people in Chaibasa, and the tightening alliance between the police, officials, and merchant community against the people of Chaibasa; they both chose to maintain a public silence. When, however, at the height of the movement, a local newspaper reported that the local Catholic high school might be 'de-recognized' by the government, both bishop and religious superior immediately reacted. (The ostensible reason for the threat of 'de-recognition' was a fabricated charge of religious discrimination in the school; the real reason was the role played by St. Xavier's College Hostel students in the movement.) The headmaster was directed to send a letter to the newspaper refuting the grounds for taking action against the school, and to deliver the letter personally to the editor of the newspaper. All steps were to be taken as quickly as possible to defend the school against the false charges.

Whereas the local institutions provide the Catholic community with educational and medical security, the presence of priests and religious provide the community with 'moral security' - a feeling that, in the words of Fr. Godwin, they 'have the future under control.' In a recent middle school religion class, the students were asked, 'What do you believe about Jesus and his Church?' Half of the students questioned answered, 'Whatever the fathers and sisters tell us to believe.'

This moral security is based on a somewhat legalistic and individualistic presentation of the Christian message. When this security is challenged, therefore, by homilies and discussions that attempt to analyse the corruption and injustice of Chaibasa society in the light of the Gospel **and** sociological principles, tensions arise in the community.

**Legitimizing Function :-** Does the Church in Chaibasa function as a legitimation for the existing social order in Chaibasa? There is a tendency in the Chaibasa Catholic schools to emphasize the relative values of discipline, obedience, and 'respect for autho-

rity,' to such an extent that they may appear as absolute values. In Chaibasa, where a basic source of the oppression of the people is the corruption and injustice of those in authority, such an emphasis on these values, while helping to develop respectful, authority-oriented students, helps to make Catholic education in Chaibasa a 'spreader of the doctrines upon which the social injustice is based and at the same time extend the cloak of religion's guarantee to the doctrines and their adherents' (Godwin). (This is not to deny that the emphasis on honesty in Catholic schools is an antidote to the widespread corruption in society; few Catholics, however, while perhaps honest themselves, have shown themselves ready to stand/speak up with the wider community and work for honesty and justice in society, especially when this entails confronting corrupt authority.)

The students in the movement are constantly being confronted by their former teachers (laity, priests, religious) with the question: 'But how can you say/do this against....? He/she is an officer! Whereas more and more students, and some of the public, are working to make wealthy members of the community, government and police officers, and authorities in general become servants of the people, clergy, teachers and other authorities in the Church (perhaps identifying to some extent with their 'equals' in other fields) urge that the wealthy, the officers, and other authorities be respected and honored so that they will feel 'better disposed' towards the people. Such an attitude is a good reflection of the thinking of the religious superior during the Chaibasa movement. He was upset because of the students, and people's confrontations with individual officers and merchants, and became even more upset when the students published details of the corruption and injustices practiced by these officers and merchants pointing out the individuals by name. The superior gave this as a reason for withholding his public support from the movement. Whereas no one would question the personal commitment of this superior to the good of the people of the area, whom he has served for the past twenty years, his attitude in this situation, **within the structure of relations prevailing in Chaibasa**, expresses a greater concern for the 'personal dignity' of the officers and Merchants in question than for the dignity and human rights of the tribal women degraded into working 11-12 hours a day for these Mer-



chants, with the knowledge and approval of government officials for Rs. 1.50 (legal minimum, Rs. 3.50); than the dignity and rights of students and public arrested at random by police without warrants or with false warrants; than the dignity and rights of people forced to pay exorbitant prices for food and other essential commodities because local officials and police are being paid to protect the hoarding practices of the merchant community.

**Function of Compensation:** Together with, and partly as a consequence of, its legitimating function in Chaibasa, the Church also serves as something of a local Red Cross society, caring for the 'casualties of an unjust order' rather than committing itself to radically changing the situation which 'throws off' these casualties. Time and again during the movement, Catholics would be found **visiting hospitals** where non-Catholic students had been admitted as a result of a hunger strike or an attack by an opponent of the movement; **visiting jails** where non-Catholic students were being held as a result of their efforts for justice with the people. It is only within the past few months that a few Catholic students have joined their non-Catholic brothers and sisters in efforts, not merely to put band-aids on, and visit the victims of injustice, but rather to probe and attack injustice at its root. The former 'band-aid' activity provides the satisfaction of 'doing good **to**' someone, and fits in with the somewhat individualistic catechesis that prevails, with its emphasis on individuals and relations between individuals; the latter task requires one to be **with** and suffer **with** the people, in order to bring about basic change in society.

Catholics in Chaibasa feel more comfortable with 'food for work' and 'development' schemes, than with the students' movement and confrontations with authorities in a search for justice; they prefer to dig wells with the help of American wheat supplied through the parish, than to organize and demand their legal rights to public funds available for such a well through the Block office. Fr. Godwin is right: 'It is hard not to see the function of such behavior as one of relieving the latent tensions and conflicts—within themselves and society—and thereby minimizing the possibility of a rise in the popular sense of deprivation and revolution. They (those who sponsor and those who take part in such 'band-aid' schemes), therefore, are indirectly helping to perpetuate the system.'

**Function of Criticism :-** The Church in Chaibasa performs its function of criticism very hesitantly, if at all. Whereas the leadership of the movement emanates from St. Xavier's College Hostel, opposition from within the Catholic community is often as vehement as that from the merchant community, government, and police officers. The Hostel, therefore, can hardly be said to represent the Church as an 'organization'. (This is ironic because many local officials try to depict the movement as one sponsored by the Catholic community as a whole; by doing so they also try to divert the attention of the people from the real issues and to focus on the bogus 'missionary' and CIA aspects)

Because of the presence of foreigners among the clergy and the decision of authorities to protect their continued presence in the country, and because of the minority status of the Church in Chaibasa, there is a great reluctance within the Chaibasa Church to speak or act against those in authority, however corrupt or oppressive.

In addition to the attitude of the religious superior mentioned earlier concerning student/popular confrontations with officers and merchants in person and in the press, there are other examples of this reluctance to offend authorities. At the installation ceremony of the new parish priest in Chaibasa, two Christian officers.. one a Catholic . were invited as chief guests to the ceremony, in spite of the fact the both had played leading roles in a series of illegal arrests of students in the movement. Whereas detailed accounts of the Chaibasa situation were published in the Ranchi weekly, **New Republic**, the Bombay **Examiner**, and the Calcutta **Herald**, in addition to periodic reports in the **Indian Nation**, **Searchlight**, and **Pradeep**, the monthly newsletter of the religious community which staffs St. Xavier's College Hostel (and most of the other institutions in the diocese) chose to report only that there was 'student trouble' in Chaibasa; that merely as a 'precautionary move,' all the students of St. Xavier's College Hostel were arrested one night 'to prevent them from causing any trouble'; the newsletter's report mentioned nothing about the fact that the police and BSF had broken into the private hostel to make the mass arrests; the students were seized half-naked out of their beds in the middle of the night; the police and BSF refused to



produce warrants upon request; when warrants were eventually issued ten hours later, they were made out in false names which were then imposed upon the already arrested students; these and other details of similar violence against the people of Chaibasa were not reported in the newsletter, in spite of the fact that, as previously mentioned, a daily record of the Chaibasa situation was provided to the religious superior responsible for the newsletter; another parish bulletin proudly announced that the parish had put up BSF troops for a few days in its compound; at the same time this Parish bulletin pleaded for 'student peace'.

A few weeks later the diocesan newsletter reported 'trouble in Chaibasa' in contrast to the 'peace' in other parts of the diocese; the newsletter reported that in order to bring 'law and order' to the Chaibasa situation, the BSF had to be called in. Conspicuously absent was a description of the type of 'law and order' that the BSF and armed police imposed on the people of Chaibasa: lathi charge on the site of the students' hunger strike; widespread illegal arrests; protection of illegally stocked merchant godowns; menacingly patrolling the Chaibasa bazaar and frightening village men of and women. The editor of this newsletter also was in possession of the daily record of events in Chaibasa.

It is difficult to avoid contrasting this reluctance to speak out against corruption and injustice, to the example of Jesus who was so 'clear... in his accusations and attacks that his own disciples were shocked, and chided him not to offend these leaders and make them angry... Powerless, eschewing violence, he challenged and criticized the elite of his day and their values' (Fr. Godwin).

The credibility of the Church's practice of its function of criticism will in part be based on whether she is speaking out/acting on behalf of her own interests or on behalf of the interests of the community at large. Although the bishop in the Chaibasa situation did not utter a word or take any action in the face of widespread oppressive measures taken by the merchant community and government and police officers against the people of Chaibasa, he had previously made urgent appeals for help in the 'struggle' against the Bihar Freedom of Religion Bill.

**Meaning Functions:-** Catholics in Chaibasa frequently ask what the student movement with the people for justice has to do with religion; why should Catholics, let alone clergy and religious, participate in the movement? Fr. Godwin, quoting at length the Archbishop of Montreal, points out how the present practice of the sacrament of penance—with its emphasis on 'confession'—plays down the call to personal conversion and the correction of unacceptable situations. The social dimension of the Christian call is diminished in the pursuit of 'individual purity'. Anyone who has 'heard confessions' in Chaibasa town and the surrounding villages, and then witnessed the Catholic community's indifference/opposition to the spreading movement for justice in the area, cannot help but suspect that there is a connection between what the people have been 'catechized' as regards the sacrament of penance, and their (lack of) response to the movement. Uppermost in the minds of the people at the time of participation in the sacrament of penance—or 'confession,' 'paap sweekar,' 'paap udub' as it is called in the Chaibasa area—are prayer before and after meals, not attending 'Church' on Sundays—usually because of work at home or in the fields, losing one's temper with someone in the family, and things sexual. In the midst of widespread injustice, such concerns—repeated over and over again—in the sacrament of penance serve to 'privatize' religion and ignore the **social meaning of sin**. This is an influential factor in the Catholic community's reluctance to participate with the students and others in their efforts to 'correct unacceptable social situations'.

**Credibility and Basic Options:-** Fr. Godwin warns that mere official platitudes — voiced here and abroad — by representatives of the Indian Church about 'conscientization,' 'liberation' 'identification with the masses,' 'development of the full man,' and other phrases born as a result of the blood, effort and experience of others — but often prostituted by Church and other authorities —are not enough; we must be "willing, at the same time, to stand by (the oppressed) when they agitate, to organize them.... This demands a strategy and some basic options; otherwise (we are) liable to opt out when the 'heads have to be counted' or when the 'going gets rough.'"

In the Chaibasa situation, up until the events of 20th March 1974, both the religious superior in question and the bishop had



given frequent verbal support **in private** to the movement. However, when things got 'rough' – when the movement radicalized, as pointed out in Part I of this essay – both fell silent, publicly and privately. Both gave indications of 'opting out.'

The religious superior was 'strongly requested' by the Deputy Commissioner to remove from the district a religious who was associated with the movement. At first, the superior refused; changing his mind, he then decided to order the religious brother out of the district, but was persuaded not to do so by others closer to the situation. Finally, the superior ordered the religious prematurely out of the district 'on personal business,' not revealing that the 'personal business' could just as well have been taken care of at a somewhat later date. The superior's decision to remove the brother from the district was accepted by the Deputy Commissioner as compliance with his earlier 'request,' although the Deputy Commissioner had never presented any legal grounds for the dismissal of the brother from the district; the decision was seen by the students and Catholic community of Chaibasa as a direct disciplinary act against the brother for his work with the students in the movement, and as an indication of non-support for the radicalization of the movement.

The bishop, when he came to Chaibasa for the installation of a new parish priest, only reluctantly agreed to a small meeting concerning the student movement. Whereas previously – previous to 20th March—he had been one of the few to express support for the work, in this meeting he continually referred to the movement as an 'experiment' which he 'neither supported nor opposed.'

A few weeks previously, a large group of diocesan seminarians, who had come to Chaibasa to study the local tribal language, had been given strict orders by the diocesan chancellor not to involve themselves with the students and the movement. At the same time an even larger group of religious scholastics were 'vacationing' at the local Catholic high school in Chaibasa; although many of them were themselves college students, only two of them came once or twice to meet with the students and inquire about the movement.

The above incidents raise the question of credibility regarding the clergy and Church/religious superiors in Chaibasa. To what extent are they ready to act according to their frequent protestations of commitment to 'the people,' to 'the oppressed?' The incidents also raise the question of basic options. The difference between the attitudes of the bishop and religious superior before and after the events of 20th March, 1974, would seem to indicate that neither has made a basic option concerning the movement. When the 'going got rough,' therefore, they gave strong evidence of 'opting out.'

**Summary :-** The above analysis of the role and functions of the Catholic Church in relation to the Chaibasa movement would indicate the following:

1. **The bishop and religious superior,** because of the minority position of the local Church and because of the presence of foreign clergy whose continued presence in the country they desire to protect, wish to avoid controversial public statements and actions. Because of this and because of their as yet making no basic option as regards the Chaibasa movement, they found it difficult/impossible to support the radicalization of the Chaibasa movement after 20th March, 1974.

The religious superior, because of his belief that the present Church institutions are the best available means to spread the message of Christ, is committed to their protection.

2. **Clergy and religious in Chaibasa area:-** With very few exceptions, they reflect the opinions/attitudes of the bishop and religious superior towards the movement.
3. **Local Catholic community :-** In addition to sharing the attitudes of (1.) and (2.) above, they depend heavily on the Catholic institutions for educational and medical security, and on the clergy and religious for moral security. The movement, therefore, which challenges these institutions and questions the relevance of the traditional catechesis and morality they have been taught, threatens their security. They also, therefore, find it difficult/impossible to support the movement.



4. All the above attitudes, that have surfaced upon analysis—minority consciousness, protection of foreigners, avoidance of controversy, protection of institutions, dependence upon institutions for security — inevitably lead to a public stance in society that favours the continuation of the present system — that is, status quo. Therefore, much as individual Catholics — and authorities — may protest such an alliance, the Church as an organization among other organizations in Chaibasa will often find that its interests coincide with the other forces of status quo in the area — the merchant community, government and police officials, and even some political parties. As a force of the status quo, together with other forces of the status quo, the Church will, unless some basic options and radical changes are made, find itself as an organization opposed to the interests of the people, whose only hope in the present situation is radical change in the status quo.

In other words, unless the Church in Chaibasa suffers — that is, opts for solidarity with the victims of local injustices and with their efforts to remove the causes of these injustices — dies — that is, risks the 'good name,' 'power,' 'prestige,' and 'security' of its institutions in this struggle with the people — and rises — from the powerlessness of the crucified Christ, a mockery to those in authority and to all 'respectable' people — for truth and justice, she can never be an 'authentic and credible sacrament of salvation-liberation.'

It is on this very question of our living out as a people our faith in the paschal mystery that the tragic difference between our 'good intentions' and our institutional functions is most clearly in evidence. No one — least of all the present writer, who has frequently in the past experienced the private support of the above-mentioned bishop and religious superior in connection with the students' work — can seriously doubt the personal desires of many Church authorities to work for social justice. Too often, however, the functions of these authorities, as representatives of the Church as organization, prevent them from translating their desires into genuine commitment. Recall the tragic words of Captain Vere to his men

on the 'H.M.S. Indomitable,' before, with every good intention, he condemns Billy Bud to death: 'Show us how to save him without putting aside our function.' The question before the Church in Chaibasa (and elsewhere) today is: How to put aside its traditional functions **in order to** be a credible sign of liberation/salvation amidst the people?

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